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TRAINING IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION.

[An address delivered before the State Teachers' Association at San Jose, December, 1886.]

It has for a long time been my conviction that the gravest difficulties which, as teachers, we have to meet, do not concern themselves with means, but with ends. It is comparatively an easy matter to equip one's self with the necessary apparatus for any given branch of the teacher's profession; it is a far more difficult thing in the midst of the distraction of details and the turmoil of actual work, to keep steadily and calmly in view the distant object, the end and goal of all effort. Too often it is the case that to our dim vision the means themselves become ends; too often the successful working of this or that pretty piece of educational machinery is more attentively regarded than the part which that machinery is to play in the shaping of a human being unto life's work and life's power. To my thought, the chief significance and value of occasions like the present lie in the opportunity they afford us of rising for a little above the confusion of details, apparatus, and means, into the clear air and the sunlight of principles; of bracing our hearts more firmly into our chosen work by keen and steady vision of the end we propose to ourselves in undertaking it. In attempting, therefore, the part which has devolved upon me here to-day, I shall not try to entertain you with presentation of any new arts or devices for the teaching of English composition. I would ask you rather to consider with me first the one supreme question in this whole matter, Why should English composition be taught? and then, if the far-reaching and conclusive answer be found, we will see what principles grow out of it to determine the conditions and methods of that training.

We live in the age of Dynamics; the age of Statics is past. Energy, intensity, *vis viva* in the new world have everywhere taken the place of mere bulk, dead weight, and lifeless mass which dominated the old. The Pyramids are the material type of the old; the steamship, the telescope, and the electric motor are types of the new. Instead of the heavy and low-browed temples of Karnak and Elephanta, carved out of solid mountain-sides, yet scarcely able to sustain their own prodigious weight, we have

the fairy architecture of the Brooklyn Bridge. Theirs was the foolish and soulless bulk of the Colossus of Rhodes; ours is Liberty Enlightening the World. Their military type was a Xerxes; ours is a Von Moltke. Their scholarly type was the heavy and encyclopedic pedant, crammed to repletion and torpidity with all sorts of crude knowledge which he could never put to use; ours is the trained athlete, whose every ounce of fiber is available for instant and finest service—a Morley, a Gladstone, a James Russell Lowell. Life itself wears to us this grander aspect that it is felt to be not a duration, not an accumulation, not an assimilation, but an energy.

I do not mean to say that the old world did not sometimes gain glimpses of this truth; it could not otherwise have become the new. Strangely enough it never loved its own types—gods made in its own dull likeness—however much it bowed the knee before them. Out of all its earth-born brood of Titans, one only ever stirred its heart with the thrill of real admiration, and that was Prometheus with his gift of celestial fire. Its instinct of fear gave Hercules a place on Olympus, but its reverence and love were for Pallas Athena and prophetic Apollo. It loved what we love, what every heart of man must love—

“ We needs must love the highest when we see it ”—

But there is this difference. That dynamic phase of human life which, in its marked embodiments, could not escape the notice of the ancient world, seemed to them a special gift out of hand, bestowed by the gods on whom they would, and hence to be sought by sacrifice and prayer. We, no less reverently acknowledging the gift, find it to be not a definite and limited fact, but a far-reaching—an infinite—possibility, to be developed by fostering circumstances, by generous nurture, by the discipline of strenuous exertion. We see more clearly than they did that there is a training of power and unto power—power spiritual and intellectual as well as physical.

Life is a power and a possibility in every department of its wide realm, from its lowest to its highest. All education, all training, is for the development and liberation of energy, for the realization of possibilities. The higher the power, the nobler the possibility, the more imperative the training. Thought is life's supreme power and possibility. Speech is the most universal, most effective, most enduring expression of thought; the measure, for most uses, of its available, its convertible energy. The Word is still, as of old, Life incarnate and dwelling among men. Thus is our first question answered.

If developing powers are to be trained through strenuous exertion unto larger growth and efficiency, the very first condition is that they be gener-

ously supported and fed. Thought is the food of thought. All masterful souls have been prodigious feeders. Powers in their highest development and maturity will dwindle and die unless they have constant nourishment; how much more the tender and budding powers of the child! Here is the bitterest and most cruel mistake of all our attempts at teaching this subject. Too frequently the training, so-called, is nothing more than the exaction of a written paper at stated intervals. Most likely we do not even concern ourselves to see that a subject upon which his thought can really fasten itself is suggested to the pupil, much less that stimulating and assimilable material is put within his reach. Have we forgotten Pharaoh's taskmasters and the bitterness of that inexorable tale of "bricks without straw"? Have we forgotten with what intent Pharaoh's policy was instituted and carried on? Was it for the development of the powers and possibilities of the race thus cared for, that it might be fruitful and multiply? Ah, no! And do we wonder that spontaneity, enthusiasm, and the elation which accompanies free activity are crushed out under our exactions? Is it strange that in the stirring world about us we find everywhere men educated in our schools, who, because of what we have done or have undone, never put pen to paper, never voice their thought in words, never bring the struggling spirit within them to birth—impotent, perhaps, through our cruelty? Is it strange, on the other hand, that those who by our exactions are forced to steal both clay and straw, should presently find it easier to steal bricks outright, and that having mastered thus the secret of composition, in their subsequent career they shame us as well as themselves by publishing the work of others as their own? "It must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" No! if the child is to be trained to speak at all, and to speak honestly, see to it that he has thoughts furnished him; thoughts as well as facts, in variety and suggestiveness far transcending the scope of the immediate exercise; thoughts so numerous that he cannot possibly use them all, some of them so deep-toned that as yet he dare not utter them again, though his heart thrill strangely at their sound. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." There is no other speech. Be not afraid, O faithless teacher, lest he make some of these treasures his own. Fear rather lest, by withholding these, not composition merely, but life itself be defrauded of its rightful stature and strength!

But training means more than mere sustentation; it means strenuous exertion. It is not enough that powers be supported and fed; they must be vigorously exercised; they must be tasked, not indeed to exhaustion, but quite up to the limit of their buoyant and healthy activity. The

abundant opportunity for this high exercise is found in the act of composition. Composition is a 'putting together'—a putting together of thought and thought, or of thought and thing, under the control of a superior thought. In the sense of the embodied result of such effort we apply the term not merely to the child's faltering attempt, but to "Hamlet," to the "Paradise Lost," to a symphony of Beethoven; to a trilogy of Wagner, to Raphael's "Transfiguration," to Angelo's "Last Judgment." And rightly because we recognize in all these alike that individual and personal element which alone gives them value; that high activity of soul, call it imagination, invention, vision, or what you will, which thinks diverse elements into wholes, which selects and groups the materials of thought, and in its own white heat shapes them into enduring form after its own image. Such activity, in its measure and degree, is possible for the child. This is the fundamental postulate, not in this particular branch of education merely, but in all education, nay more, in all intellectual and spiritual life. Composition in its restricted sense deals with one special embodiment of this living power—with its birth in words. To bring the pupil up to the point of this supreme effort in such heart and temper that he shall not flinch from it, is the one object of all training in composition. Much may be done for him through wise choice of subjects, so related to his powers that he shall be able to think upon them, and so related to the materials furnished that he shall not find the thinking done for him. Much may be done by giving him a clear understanding of what he is asked to do, by encouragement, by sympathy, by wise suggestion. All this is helpful and necessary. But the supreme effort must be his own, or all the labor fails. The result is to be his intellectual offspring; in his own thought must it grow into definite shape, and he alone can bring it to birth.

We notice, in the next place, that if training is to be effective, it must be continuous and cumulative. It will not do to allow the gathered momentum and power to be lost in the intervals between efforts. Here it is that the best directed methods often fail. Exercises, however good taken singly, are often placed at such distances asunder that they do not link themselves into coherence and continuity. Composition, under such circumstances, never becomes a habit, but remains to the end an ordeal. Neither the elation of success, nor the shame of conscious failure, nor the clarified vision which comes to one in these enkindled moods, is made available for the next start. What should we think of an exercise in arithmetic once a month? or even once a week? Yet such is commonly thought to be a sufficient, nay, even a generous, allowance for composition at the same age. The actual interval must, of course, be determined in each case by

the pupil's advancement and his power of retaining and carrying onward the impressions made at each exercise. But in every case I am persuaded the interval should be far less than we are likely to make it. If only there were this continuity of effect, how speedily would our compositions lose that foolish extension and that vicious pretension which characterize the rare and unusual feat! How much might they gain in the precious qualities of steadiness, sobriety, directness, and intensity—qualities of the constant workman!

Composition, of course, is oral as well as written. I have consciously included both sorts in these remarks. I find them subject to the same broad principles, and would have them go hand in hand in all this training. I would only remark in passing that hap-hazard and desultory speech, whether in the school-room or out of it, is in no proper sense a training in oral composition; nor can speech be perfected for higher uses in any other way so well as by frequently fixing its momentary and elusive features on the written page, where they can be brought into court, identified, and judged.

One more inference would I draw from the broad principle whose relation to our subject we have been discussing. Since this training is to be an apprenticeship in speaking and writing to the end that these may become spontaneous and effective, not in the school-room merely, but rather in the great world outside, it becomes imperative that the methods and circumstances of that training, the influences which shape it, and the stimulus which urges it on, be made, as far as possible, those of the great world itself. These must be real and natural, not factitious and artificial; real in that in every effort the thing produced is a genuine utterance of a genuine thought; real in that the thought has intrinsic interest, and is felt to be worth the effort to utter it; real, too, in enthusiasm, in generous emulation to give it nobler utterance than others have done. The training, moreover, must be real in its progress. It must not forever linger among the "beggarly elements." It must not be a climb on sliding sand, but on firm steps of granite. Vantage-ground gained and gathered power are but the means of further outreach and completer mastery. "Forgetting those things which are behind, reaching forth unto those things which are before." It must be natural in its appliances for securing correction and amendment. The great world of life rarely allows opportunity to correct and retouch any work that has once passed from the workman's hands. It wants no botching. It demands not emendation, but amendment. Its apparent coldness and heartlessness we need not imitate; but its large method is really the only kind and effective one. Note also

how justly the great world lays its emphasis in these matters not on faults as we are apt to do, but on excellencies. Excellence is the precious and positive attainment on which its whole heart is fixed. Faults occupy its attention negatively and incidentally, as obstacles merely—obstacles that must be borne down and trampled under foot in the eager rush for that attainment. Its judgment, moreover, is not a critic's dictum, delivered *ex cathedra*, and for that very reason prompting to revolt. It is rather a consensus of one's fellow-workmen, a verdict of one's peers—intelligible because based on comparison with similar work, and therefore final. If we are to succeed, it must be by ridding ourselves and our pupils of the bondage to detailism, and by introducing into our training somewhat of the breadth and certainty of nature's own plan, the reality of effort, the stimulus of emulation, the habit of comparison, the resulting insight and power of independent judgment, the development to the utmost of special ability and individual excellence through appeal to genuine enthusiasms and the constraining power of noble ideals.

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